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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001360

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [ZI](#)
SUBJECT: ZANU-PF WINS RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTIONS --
BUT LOW TURNOUT IS THE REAL STORY

REF: A. HARARE 1294

[1](#)B. HARARE 1283

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

[1](#)1. (U) In an election characterized by extremely low turnout, the ruling party won the vast majority of the 1,326 Rural District Council (RDC) seats. The MDC managed victories, however, in a number of areas, including a few previously considered impenetrable. ZANU-PF relied heavily on pressure and intimidation in lieu of naked violence to sway voters) tactics elections observers point to as something to watch heading into the 2008 presidential elections. For the MDC, the RDC elections seem to have revived talk of reunification, as both factions realize they would have done better together. End Summary.

The Real Result) Low Turnout

[1](#)2. (U) Official election results are yet to be announced by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission; however, the government-controlled daily The Herald reported that ZANU-PF took control of 1,247 of 1,326 RDC seats (765 contested and 482 unopposed). The anti-Senate MDC faction released results that showed the two MDC factions won a combined 89 contested seats, with the anti-Senate faction prevailing in 54 seats and the pro-Senate faction winning 35 seats.

[1](#)3. (C) The real story of the election was the extremely low voter turnout. Even ZANU-PF was unable to turnout the votes

in areas that historically had been easy ZANU-PF wins. Masvingo, for instance, is a traditional ZANU-PF powerbase and home to several of the party's top leaders. The anti-Senate faction, however, picked-up six seats there marking the first ever RDC wins for the opposition in the province. According to one ZANU-PF MP from Masvingo, party candidates there received fewer votes in some cases than the supposed number of ZANU party "leaders" in the voting district. And in Mashonaland East province, another ZANU-PF stronghold, the anti-Senate picked-up the Chikomba ward seat. Despite these breakthroughs, the election was a setback for the MDC, which saw its voters fail to turnout throughout most of the country.

Intimidation A Key Factor

14. (U) Zimbabwe Electoral Systems Network (ZESN), the principal local elections monitoring organization, fielded more than 500 observers (reftels) through the country. They reported that the election were generally peaceful and orderly. ZESN found, however, that ZANU-PF employed a variety of tactics to depress turnout and ensure victory. Obstructive electoral procedures were manipulated to disqualify opposition candidates. For instance, more than 500 would-be candidates from the two MDC factions were not allowed to participate.

15. (U) ZANU-PF used similar tactics to disenfranchise thousands of potential voters, who were turned away from polling stations) the majority of which for not appearing on the voter rolls. At one polling station in Mashonaland

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Central, ZESN observed that by the end of the morning (the peak time for voting) 120 voters had cast their vote while 81 had been turned away. The government cited a "lack of resources" for scaled back and centralized voter registration efforts.

16. (U) The partisan role of some traditional leaders was also a concern for election observers. Through pressure and by offering perquisites, ZANU-PF prevailed on traditional leaders to get out the vote for the party. The chiefs and headmen in turn used pressure and threats on voters. For example, in Mutasa, Makoni and Chimanimani in Manicaland province, leaders reportedly forced their subjects to vote for ZANU-PF by threatening to cut off access to government-supplied maize for those who didn't toe the party line.

Lessons Learned for the Democratic Opposition

17. (C) ZESN said that in future elections, ZANU-PF would continue to rely on its lock on power to implement even more restrictions on electoral procedures and increase the level of intimidation to further tilt the playing field. These tactics were harder for the opposition to combat and aroused less international condemnation than overt violence. That said, ZESN interpreted the ruling party's widespread use of these tactics in the RDC elections as a sign of the extent to which they worry about their declining popular appeal heading into the next presidential and parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for 2008 and 2010 respectively.

18. (C) As for the MDC, the RDC elections seem to have brought home to the leaders of both factions the degree to which the split has hurt their electoral prospects. In a number of constituencies, the two factions combined vote would have beaten the ZANU-PF candidate. More generally, our contacts in both factions say there is a growing realization that the split has demoralized opposition supporters and depressed their turnout. As a result, talks over reunification have

resumed, though prospects are uncertain given that there are leaders on both sides who fear reunification would cost them power and influence (septel).

Comment

19. (C) ZANU-PF's recent electoral victories follow the same pattern - low turnout caused by voter apathy in the face of a heavily rigged electoral system. What ZANU-PF has not been able to do, however, is increase its' own share of the vote. And, indeed, if the evidence from Masvingo is anything to go by, ZANU's own voter base is just as apathetic as the populace at large. A reunified and revived MDC therefore remains a threat to ZANU-PF in any free and fair election. In a telling comment, the ZANU-PF chair of the Lands, Land Reform, Resettlement and Agriculture parliamentary portfolio committee told us that in a free and fair presidential election, voters would turn out in numbers and elect the opposition candidate. But as long as ZANU-PF controls the electoral apparatus there will not be a free and fair election and the ruling party will continue to engineer results to retain its hold on power.
DELL